

# Subaltern groups and linguistic prejudice in the media. An introduction

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**ENG Abstract:** The representation of subaltern groups in the media is governed by stereotyping, which only perpetuates social hierarchies and limits agency.

These subaltern groups, marginalized by race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status, face linguistic prejudice, which is evident both in the terminology and in the biased representation made of them, for example, dehumanizing immigrants, presenting racial minorities in contexts of dependency, stereotyping LGBTQ+ people and religious minorities or victimizing women, which overshadows their strengths and contributions to society.

Inclusive and accurate media representation is crucial to challenging these biases, dismantling stereotypes, and promoting equity in societal narratives.

**Keywords:** Discourse; Cultural hegemony; Media framing; Othering

**Contents:** 1. Introduction. 2. Subaltern groups. 3. Linguistic prejudice: bias, victimization, and hierarchical dynamics. 4. Conclusion. References.

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## 1. Introduction

The representation of subaltern groups in the media—those marginalized by race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status—reveals persistent mechanisms of linguistic prejudice that reproduce ideological hierarchies and constrain agency. From a critical discourse perspective, the media act as sites of power where language naturalizes domination through strategies of framing, labeling, and exclusion. As Hall (1997) asserts, representation does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it, producing meaning within specific relations of power. Expressions such as *illegal immigrant* or *Islamic terrorist* exemplify how discourse functions as a tool of symbolic violence (van Dijk, 1991), reinforcing an “us versus them” dichotomy that legitimizes inequality and sustains social stratification.

In the digital era, discursive practices are further amplified through algorithmic mediation and participatory platforms, which often replicate hegemonic narratives under the guise of pluralism (López-Rabadán, 2022). These dynamics illustrate how linguistic and semiotic choices contribute to the ideological reproduction of otherness and the marginalization of specific communities. Addressing such patterns demands uncovering the power relations embedded in discourse and fostering ethical communicative practices grounded in inclusion and epistemic justice. Promoting accurate and diverse representation thus becomes essential to destabilize hegemonic imaginaries and to advance toward more equitable, plural, and critically aware media cultures.

## 2. Subaltern groups

Subalternity sets the stage for verbalizing the experiences, predicaments, and characteristics of those consumed either by marginality or exclusion from power structures. Representation, or the lack of it, in the media is vital, as the views and narratives of these constituencies are frequently omitted or distorted. Thus, this monographic number intends to zoom in on the construction and other representations of subalternity around several interrelated factors, such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion.

These factors will be analyzed using diverse theoretical frameworks and some empirical research, which will disclose the representations of the voices of the subaltern “other” in specific media niches. Through a

critical inspection of representation, it becomes possible to grapple with how a particular set of constituencies is often silenced or misrepresented. The inquiry thus sets off conversations on inequalities in the levels of representation in the media while stressing the necessity of integrating narratives that regard the complexity of social experiences.

Stuart Hall's representation theory states that media creates meaning and does not merely mirror the existing situation (Hall, 1997). As a result, the representation of subaltern groups through the medium, which conforms to stereotype archetypes existing within mainstream cultures, often leads to misunderstanding.

For example, in Latin American media, race is used to romanticize or victimize indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, ignoring both their agency and their viewpoints, reinforcing their sense of alienation.

Similar portrayals are observed about other **racial minorities** in media everywhere, showing their poverty and dependency (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). These portrayals not only further biases but also perpetuate power dynamics that marginalize minority groups.

When it comes to **origin**, the media narrative surrounding immigrants and refugees tends to position them as outsiders, strengthening their marginalized position in society. This is evident in how Middle Eastern and Latin American immigrants are portrayed in Western media, often seen as threats to safety or economic stability (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Such portrayals create an "us versus them" narrative that pushes these groups to the margins and shapes perspectives.

In her work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak (1988) discusses how systems of representation silence subaltern voices. Spivak notes that subalterns' stories are often filtered through structures that reinforce their marginalization, resulting in limited opportunities for them to share their experiences in the media.

Many publications explore how racial minorities are represented in the media, pointing out that they are frequently shown in contexts of poverty and dependency.

Among these works, a report by T. L. Dixon, co-commissioned by Family Story and Color of Change in 2017, *A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media*, demonstrated the pattern of media bias, revealing that black families are frequently depicted as poor in news and opinion media, constituting 59% of such portrayals despite representing only 27% of the actual poor population. Conversely, white families are underrepresented, appearing as 17% of people experiencing poverty in media while accounting for 66% in reality. This misrepresentation perpetuates harmful stereotypes and influences public perception.

Color of Change has also published *Changing the Narrative about Black Families. An Anti-Racist Guide for Avoiding the Inaccurate and Biased Language that Turns Society against Black Families*, by Robinson & Rodgers, 2020.

Ross Arguedas and others published *News for the Powerful and Privileged: How Misrepresentation and Underrepresentation of Disadvantaged Communities Undermine Their Trust in News* in 2023. This study examines how disadvantaged communities, including racial minorities, are misrepresented or underrepresented in news media, leading to diminished trust in these sources.

Sandhya & Neelam's "Portrayal of Indian Actors in Western Media" (2023) studies the representation of Indian actors in Western shows and movies, indicating that these are not necessarily accurate or representative of the entire Indian population and, additionally, some movies perpetuate harmful stereotypes or inaccuracies about Indian culture and history.

These publications, among others, show that media tend to associate racial minorities with poverty and dependency, which echoes the concerns raised by Entman & Rojecki in 2000, as mentioned.

**Gender subalternity** in mass media is another critical area of analysis since they usually reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes, portraying women in subordinate roles or emphasizing their physical appearance over their intellectual capabilities. Tuchman (1978) indicated that this trivialization or the fact of ignoring women's contributions and experiences is known as the "symbolic annihilation" of women. Many recent studies have examined how media representations keep reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes, often portraying women in subordinate roles or emphasizing their physical appearance over intellectual capabilities.

For example, in 2021, in her Master's thesis, Pereira Fernandez analyzed all articles from the Football section of the British newspaper *The Guardian* published between 2002 and 2020. She studied semantic and syntactical differences. As for semantics, "the media has a bigger focus on family and personal issues when reporting on women's football. Furthermore, the media also concentrates their coverage more on what happens on the pitch for male footballers than female ones."

Haris et al. (2023) published "Identifying Gender Bias in Blockbuster Movies Through the Lens of Machine Learning," where they analyze the portrayal of gender roles in English movies and find patterns that align with societal stereotypes, such as men shown as more dominant and women more joyful.

In 2023, in "Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification, and Sexualization," Santonicollo, Trombetta, Paradiso & Rollè explore research on the relationship between media portraits and gender stereotypes, objectification, and sexualization. They focus on their presence in the cultural context and show that they are still very common.

The article "Stereotypical Portrayal of Gender in Mainstream Media and Its Effects on Societal Norms: A Theoretical Perspective" by Seluman, Eguono, Gbenga & Aimimode (2024) discusses how women are predominantly portrayed as caregivers, homemakers, or objects of desire, while men are depicted as breadwinners and leaders, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

AlDahoul, Ibrahim, Park, Rahwan & Zaki (2024), in "Inclusive Content Reduces Racial and Gender Biases, Yet Non-Inclusive Content Dominates Popular Culture," examine media forms like fashion magazines, movie

posters, and advertisements. They find that women are more likely to be portrayed with their entire bodies, while men are presented with their faces, exemplifying “face-ism,” which promotes the idea that men are more competent and intelligent.

These publications show that media maintain traditional gender stereotypes, concentrating on women’s physical appearance rather than on their intellectual abilities and depicting them in subordinate roles.

Regarding **sexual gender and sexual orientation**, historically, LGBTQ+ characters were invisible or portrayed negatively, reinforcing stereotypes and stigma (Gross, 2001). While there has been progress in increasing the visibility and diversity of LGBTQ+ characters, problems remain, such as tokenism and the abundance of harmful stereotypes, including the representation of gay men as the “sassy sidekick” and the sexualization of lesbians for the male gaze (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

Also, the representation of transgender and non-binary people often falls into stereotypes that fail to show their authentic experiences (Serano, 2007).

Recent studies have examined the evolving representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in mass media, highlighting progress and persistent challenges. For example, the *Where We Are on TV* report, 2022-2023, by GLAAD (the world’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender media advocacy organization) emphasizes that while LGBTQ+ representation on the United States television has reached new record highs, there is still a lack of diversity, with transgender images on TV being particularly scarce.

Ungless, Ross & Lauscher (2023) investigate in their research article “Stereotypes and Smut: The (Mis) representation of Non-Cisgender Identities by Text-to-Image Models” how advanced image generation models handle diverse gender identities. They find that non-cisgender identities are often misrepresented, dehumanized, and sexualized, reflecting and potentially reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Also, the people depicted were almost always white, reflecting a media bias to represent non-binary individuals as white.

Sawansukha & Tushir (2023) explore the role of the media in challenging or perpetuating stereotypes about the LGBTQIA+ community in “Role of Media in Breaking Stereotypes Related to the LGBTQIA+ Community Among Young Adults.” They indicate that accurate and diverse representations are needed to combat stigma among young adults.

Ng, Chow & Yang (2024) analyze LGBT portrayals in a vast news media dataset in Singapore from 2010 to 2020 in their article “News Media Coverage of LGBT Identities Over 10 Years in a 400-Million-Word Dataset.” They reveal that certain stereotypes and stigmatizing narratives persist while visibility has increased.

These publications underscore that, although there is an increased visibility, media representations of LGBTQ+ individuals continue to show subalternity, with portrayals that can perpetuate stereotypes and stigma.

**Religious subalternity**, often linked to racial prejudice, is particularly visible in the portrayal of Muslim communities in Western media. According to Said (1978), Orientalism describes how Western media depict Eastern societies, particularly Muslims, in a way that justifies Western dominance. This is evident in the frequent association of Islam with terrorism and extremism in news media, which contributes to Islamophobia and the marginalization of Muslim communities (Powell, 2011). Similarly, other religious minorities, such as Sikhs and Hindus, often find their beliefs and practices misrepresented or exoticized, further entrenching their subaltern status.

Notable recent publications include “News Coverage of Islam and Muslims in North America” (2024), where Al-Rawi analyzes how Orientalist discourses in North American media have racialized Islam, leading to the oppression of Muslims.

In “The Lived Experience of Racism in the Sikh Community” (2024), Brewer, Singh & Lyons investigate the experiences of racism among Sikh adults in the United Kingdom, highlighting how media stereotyping contributes to their misidentification and abuse.

“What Kind of Islamophobia? Representation of Muslims and Islam in Italian and Spanish Media” (2021), by Cervi, Tejedor & Gracia, explores how Muslims and Islam are represented in Italian and Spanish media, identifying different types of Islamophobia present in the media.

In “Mistaken Identities: The Media and Parental Ethno-Religious Socialization in a Midwestern Sikh Community” (2019), Rana, Qin & Vital-Gonzalez draw on interviews with Sikh parents in the United States to examine how media stereotyping and mistaken identities (Sikh men and boys are usually mistaken for Muslims) influence the ethnoreligious socialization of Sikh children.

These publications underscore the ongoing challenges faced by Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities in Western societies, where media representations often perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to their marginalized status.

### 3. Linguistic prejudice: bias, victimization, and hierarchical dynamics

As mentioned, certain groups are represented as marginalized in the media, frequently manifested in the language used when referring to them. According to van Dijk (1991), the media plays a role in promoting racist ideas by perpetuating such beliefs through language.

Discrimination towards these subaltern groups is often accompanied by **biased language**, for example, with terms such as “illegal immigrant.”

Bias is also evident in the way women are portrayed. They are referred to as “girls” instead of recognizing their maturity and generally emphasize their appearance rather than their skills and knowledge. In her 1995 work, Mills highlighted how language in media representations minimizes women’s achievements, reinforcing a specific narrative. As mentioned above, in her study of the Football section of the British newspaper

*The Guardian*, Pereira Fernandez (2021) finds, in terms of syntactical differences, that “the media does use different language when depending on the gender of the players they are reporting on. This is especially the case up until 2010, after which point the reporting becomes more similar between men’s and women’s football.” (p. 35)

Bias in media messaging is particularly prominent in the portrayal of Muslims. Expressions like “Islamic terrorism” and “Muslim extremist” link an entire religion to extremism. In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) argues that the notion behind the Western representation of the East is based on the idea of the East being inferior to the West. This manner of speaking contributes to biases and the marginalization of Muslim communities.

**Victimization** is also common in the media, which involves portraying groups or individuals as victims and gives a sense of reduced autonomy. This type of narrative often uses language that emphasizes the negative aspects of their experiences.

When addressing issues related to minority groups, the media often focuses on stories around poverty and crime, thereby creating a narrative that, for example, portrays black individuals as victims of systemic oppression and fails to recognize their efforts to fight injustices. According to Entman & Rojecki (2000), the portrayal of African Americans as victims can reinforce the idea that they lack autonomy (p. 78).

Also, while representing women as survivors of violence and abuse might be vital to raising awareness about these issues, it is counterproductive, as it can overshadow women’s strengths. Gill (2007) studies gender in the media, specifically in talk shows, magazines, news, advertising, and contemporary screen and paperback romances, and examines how representations of women and men are changing in the current century, partly due to feminist, queer, and anti-racist critique. She points out that depicting women as survivors in media stories evokes sympathy rather than empowerment (p. 45).

Also, members of the LGBTQ+ community are frequently shown as targets of discrimination, violence, and prejudice, with media reports often focusing on incidents like hate crimes and suicides. While it is important to highlight these events, solely emphasizing victimization narratives can downplay stories of strength within the LGBTQ+ community. Gross (2001) discusses media limitations to show the complex reality of gay identity and suggests that narratives centered on victimization contribute to a limited perspective on LGBTQ+ individuals’ life experiences (p. 112).

It is also frequent to find **hierarchical dynamics** through language, which involves making choices in language that reinforce biases and victimization. This includes using specific terms and framing angles. Terminology words are powerful, with meanings that trigger emotions. For instance, labeling immigrants as “undocumented citizens” not only attaches a stigma to their status but also reduces their humanity. According to Lakoff (1987), language in political discourse often includes terminology that influences viewpoints in line with specific ideologies (p. 114). Many researchers, such as Wei, Jacobson López & Wu (2019), study how stigmatizing language perpetuates anti-immigrant prejudice in the United States.

Moreover, “framing” entails selecting story aspects to emphasize while neglecting others (Entman, 1993). This technique can shape a narrative that supports hierarchy. For instance, media reports on crime might emphasize the ethnicity of the offender, mainly if they belong to a minority group, reinforcing stereotypes. Framing influences media conversations, shaping people’s perceptions and reinforcing existing power dynamics. It is also widely used in new digital media, as López-Rabadán (2022) shows.

Media coverage tends to focus on challenges such as crime and violence in groups’ lives while sidelining stories of perseverance and success, which creates an image where the definition of these groups comes from their struggles. Continuously highlighting the aspects of their experiences can maintain a narrative of helplessness, as it has been discussed by multiple authors, such as Spivak (1988), Mohanty (1988), hooks (1992), and Appadurai (2006), among many others.

In sum, mass media discourses construct subalternity by representing and framing race, gender, origin, sexual orientation, and religion.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this review highlights how linguistic prejudice in the media operates as a mechanism of symbolic domination that perpetuates existing power hierarchies. By examining previous studies and theoretical perspectives, it becomes clear that media discourse contributes to sustaining structural inequalities through labeling, framing, and the normalization of certain linguistic and cultural identities. The way subaltern groups—such as migrants, racialized communities, or speakers of stigmatized varieties—are represented reinforces notions of “otherness” that naturalize exclusion and undermine linguistic and cultural diversity. Addressing these dynamics is not only a matter of linguistic justice but also a social and ethical imperative, since language remains a powerful tool for constructing and reproducing difference. Promoting media literacy and critical awareness among communication professionals and audiences is therefore essential to challenge hegemonic narratives and to foster more inclusive, equitable, and plural forms of representation.

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